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ABSTRACT

How can instructional designers create executive education, seminar style (non-credit) courses that are short (one to two hours) but still provide a meaningful learning experience for managers and executives in an organization? Engaging and motivating learners in short courses without traditional assessment formats or external motivators such as grades or academic credit is difficult to do and presents a challenge for designers who have "grown up" developing academic courses or professional training for traditional programs. This paper presents several design solutions that have been successful in this context. Unique instructional features, specific instructional design challenges, and a program of ongoing research are also described. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/AEF)

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Building online Executive Education courses that work: Design opportunities and challenges

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Abstract

How can instructional designers create executive education, seminar style (non-credit) courses that are short (one-two hours) but still provide a meaningful learning experience for managers and executives in an organization? Engaging and motivating learners in short courses without traditional assessment formats or external motivators such as grades or academic credit is hard to do and presents a challenge for designers who have "grown up" developing academic courses or professional training for traditional programs. This paper presents several design solutions that have been successful in this context. Unique instructional features, specific instructional design challenges, and a program of ongoing research are also described.

Introduction

Executive education courses are used to teach managers and executives the skills they need to succeed in corporate leadership. The audience for these courses is typically the managers across a company or business unit within a corporation. Common topics include leadership and management styles, strategies, and tactics, motivating employees, project management, business strategy, and many others. Executive education courses differ from traditional business academic courses in that they are generally shorter, and do not offer academic credit for successful completion. We have created many executive education courses in our role as instructional designers for UNext, Inc. and Option Six, Inc. This paper describes two of the most successful course models we have developed and implemented. We will explain the pedagogical approaches we have used, describe relevant course features, discuss the instructional design challenges we have encountered, and briefly explain our ongoing research agenda.

Executive Education

In the past, it was all too common for a company to promote an employee to a management position without providing any training or education targeted at the new roles and responsibilities of this new position. The new manager was expected to transfer their proven "line" expertise into the realm of management without retraining. Unfortunately this approach does not work well for many new managers. They are suddenly expected to understand cross-functional business concepts such as those in managerial and financial accounting, marketing, sales, and managing people. Training and expertise in one area of a business as a line worker (e.g. as a sales associate, marketing analyst, or manufacturing supervisor) does not necessarily provide the ability to excel or even function in the cross-functional world of management.

It is important for managers to be able to understand the basic concepts and language used in the other areas of their company. Why is it important to work within the information technology constraints dictated by the network manager? Why is it important to use the "company colors" on all new products? How do the operations of a certain business unit affect the corporate financial statements? Why is this important to the health of the company? These are questions that executive education courses are designed to help new managers and executives answer for themselves. They don't need a thorough conceptual understanding of accounting systems or network security measures, such as they might receive in a certification or academic MBA course, and a one to two hour course or suite of courses is often sufficient.

Executive education courses have often been delivered in traditional training environments, such as corporate training classrooms or off-site seminar rooms. The online courses we create are experienced in an

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anytime, anywhere format from the manager's networked computer, at work or home, whenever they have the time in their busy schedule. We have found most participants are able to devote an hour or two at a time to this kind of training. We attempt to keep each suite of courses short enough so that a new manager could finish the entire suite in one business day. In many situations, one dedicated "learning" day is more effective than trying to stretch the course out and keep participants motivated over several weeks. Occasionally, a business will have experience and resources to implement a synchronous online seminar setting, a "virtual classroom." If this is the case, we design courses that exploit this capability. It should be noted, however, that the instructional experience (information, learning, knowledge, etc.) in each course is designed to be completely accessible even if the synchronous component fails or is inaccessible to some participants. In fact, this is one of the design challenges we discuss later in this paper.

Instructional Approaches

We have developed and implemented two major models of instruction for executive education courses. While we have used other instructional approaches for specific training needs, we believe our two primary approaches fit most of the learning content and situations that we encounter. In each course model, we have implemented the learning values of experiential learning (learning by doing) (Dewey, 1897; others?). We believe that active learners are much more likely to learn than passive ones, so each course uses many interactive elements (cite interactivity in learning research).

Cognitive apprenticeship

The first model we used for executive education is based on the cognitive apprenticeship theory of learning. In this theory, founded primarily upon Vygotsky's notions of sociocultural learning and the zone of proximal development (ZPD), learning is accomplished by participants as they are guided through the study and experience of new information and skills by cognitive experts (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). The expert begins with a large amount of control over the learning process and content, and gradually turns over more and more control of the learning to the learner. By the end of the experience, the learner is ready to perform the new skills or apply the new information on their own, in their own environment, as they begin to develop their own expertise through authentic practice.

In the training environments we create, the online course is the expert that guides the student through the learning experience. We structure the overall course experience and embed various course elements that support and guide the students' learning throughout. Beginning with a motivating and engaging lead-in to the content, we use predictable course segments that move from high "scaffolding" and gradually reduce the amount of scaffolding as the course progresses (Bruner, 1983; Rogoff, 1990; Stone, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978). In the end, the student is given tools and references to use on their own in their own work environment. Next, we'll briefly explain the course structure we've created. Please refer to figure 1 to see an example of this course structure from an actual course.

Each course is bundled with related courses in a course suite. Usually, there are four to five courses in one suite. Suites can be completed within one business day, in approximately eight to ten hours. In figure 1, the courses in the "Learn to Speak Accounting" suite are shown on the left side of the navigation frame (on the left). While there is no technical barrier to taking any course in any order, there is an implied order in the navigation system. In practice, it usually makes good "sense" to take the courses in their listed order, but we allow the learner the freedom to choose. Each course is further divided into common sections. Once again, the technical system does not require the student to follow the implied (physical) order as they work through the course, but the course content and connecting language used strongly suggest the implied order. These sections are listed in order on the right side of the navigation frame in figure 1.

Why Learn It

The first section of each course, the Why Learn It section, is designed to motivate the student's further study of the course content. Using a combination of text, images, vide, and multimedia, the overall importance of the content is explained. Often, we use a short case experience to engage the student, asking them to read or view a situation and make a few basic decisions. This experience is intended to show them that they may do not have all the answers or expertise (e.g. how to motivate different employees) they need, and that this course can help them develop their own expertise.

How It's Done

The second section of each course is the "How It's Done" section. He purpose of this section is primarily expository – explaining how a concept works in practice, how processes are carried out, or perhaps presenting a body of information that will be used in some subsequent practice or activity. The How It's Done section uses video segments, animations, text, and graphics to present information. A constant instructional practice is to include many relevant examples and cases of real companies and situations to maintain high student interest and increase the practicality of the instruction. Throughout this section, the course designer is still in control of the learning process for the most part. While no particular order is technically mandated, students generally read the text from start to finish, interacting with the course to watch videos and animations and read extra material in pop-up windows as they progress.

You Do It

The next section, "You Do It," provides an opportunity for the student to apply the information they have read, watched, and begun to learn in the How It's Done section. The You Do It section is focused on guided student activity. The course sets up a "practice field" (cite Duffy) in which the student applies information in a constructed learning space. Activities take the form of website visits, interactive animations, text -based problem scenarios, and others. The student is given more control over their own learning now, with opportunities to repeat activities, sometimes with different conditions. Some courses present several different activities that the student can choose from. We have seen students use "optional" activities in many different ways. Some students try every activity once and move on. Other students try each activity over and over until they master each. Still other students only work through one activity and then continue.

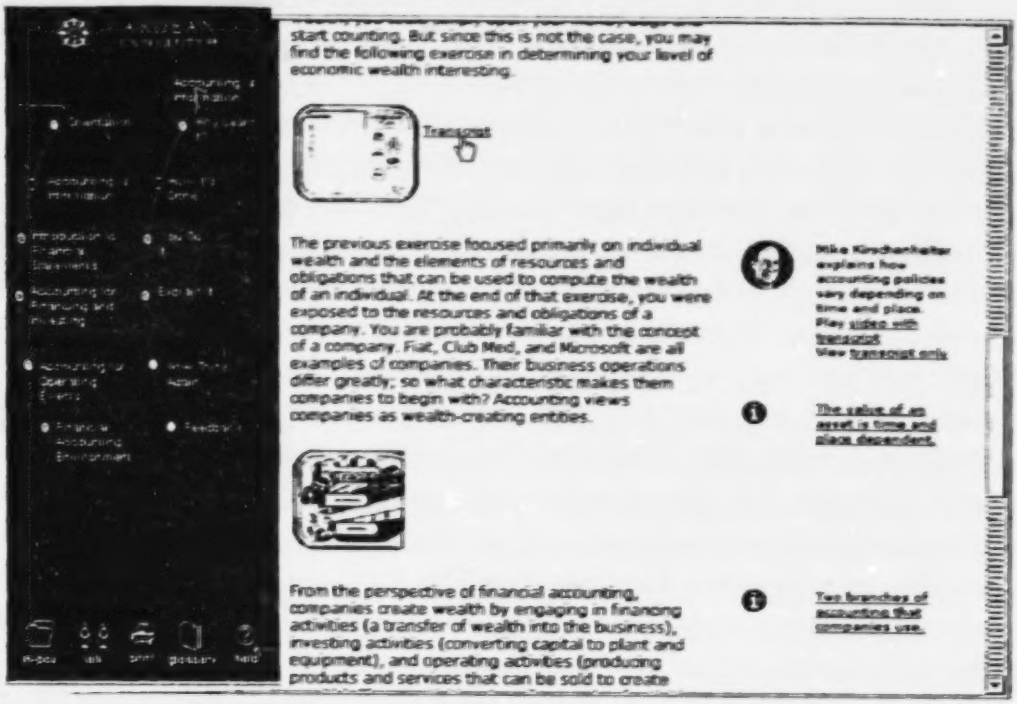
Explain It

The "Explain It" section presents the student with a chance to explain what they have learned by answering several free response questions. Students submit their answers and receive direct feedback after just a short wait (20-30 minutes). Questions usually require the student to use simple analysis, synthesis, or application skills to create fully correct answers. These questions provide an opportunity for the student to check their understanding and demonstrate that they are learning course content, and not just clicking through the course without much thought.

Now Think Again

The last section of each course, "Now Think Again," challenges the student to think about the course content in a new way – often in the context of his or her own work environment or from an alternative perspective (as an employees versus as a manager, for example). The course provides printable documents the student can "takeaway" from the course to help them implement new knowledge and skills in their work. Suggestions for further reading and helpful website references complete the course content, providing resources for the student to use after the course experience is finished. Many students report that this is one of the most useful sections of the course, especially links to relevant websites. In this section, the student is in almost full control of his or her own learning. The course content takes the form of a library of resources for the student to use as he or she applies new knowledge on their own in their own unique situation.

Figure 1. Cognitive apprenticeship course model: Learn to Speak Accounting.


start counting. But since this is not the case, you may find the following exercise in determining your level of economic wealth interesting.
Transcript
The previous exercise focused primarily on individual wealth and the elements of resources and obligations that can be used to compute the wealth of an individual. At the end of that exercise, you were exposed to the resources and obligations of a company. You are probably familiar with the concept of a company. Fiat, Club Med, and Microsoft are all examples of companies. Their business operations differ greatly; so what characteristic makes them companies to begin with? Accounting views companies as wealth-creating entities.
Mike Kinsherhater explains how accounting policies vary depending on time and place.
Play video with transcript
View transcript only
The value of an asset is time and place dependent.
From the perspective of financial accounting, companies create wealth by engaging in financing activities (a transfer of wealth into the business), investing activities (converting capital to plant and equipment), and operating activities (producing products and services that can be sold to create
Two branches of accounting that companies use.

Additional Course Features

This course model takes advantage of other features that contribute directly to its effectiveness. We use short video segments of experts, usually notable business professors, that highlight key points in the content or answer frequently asked questions. Links to video segments are located in the right margin of the course content page (see figure 1.). Transcripts of each video segment are included – just in case there are technical limitations that preclude a student from viewing one of the videos. We use Flash animations to motivate student interest, explain complex concepts, and provide interactive exercises (see figure 2.). We provide transcripts for animations that explain concepts, since they often include core course content, and students occasionally experience technical difficulties when viewing animations. Finally, we use many "pop-up" windows to display additional information to the student. These pop-ups are indicated by standard hyperlink formatting, underlined blue text (see figure 1.). The types of information we present in pop-ups include; answers to course questions, additional reading material (articles, case studies, etc.) and glossary definitions. Pop-ups increase the level of learner-content interactivity, improving the overall student experience (Gilbert & Moore, 1998; Hannifin, Hill, & Land, 1997; Trentin, 2000).

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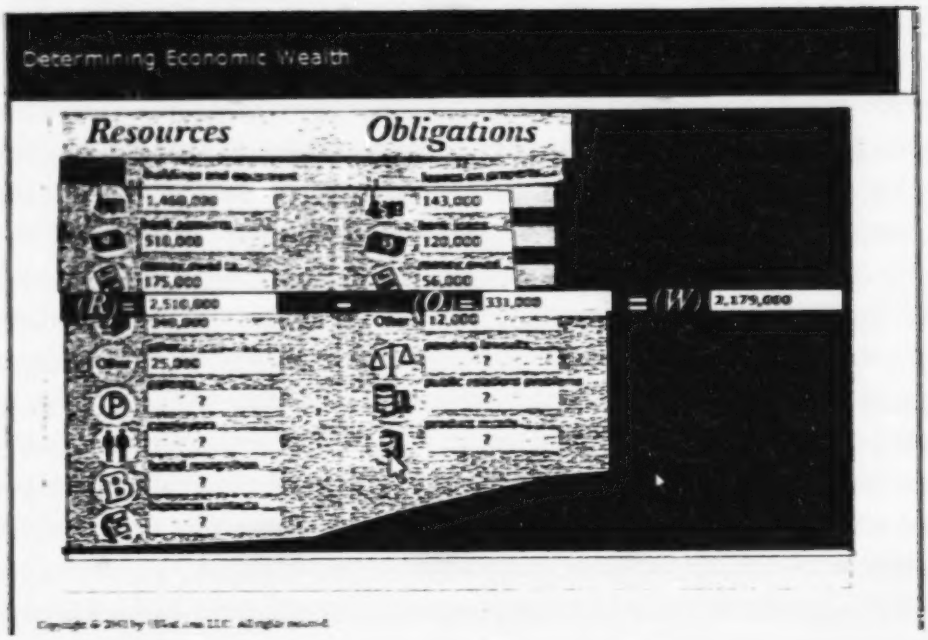
Figure 2. Interactive Animation



Sample Course: Learn to Speak Accounting

One of the courses created using this instructional model is titled "Learn to Speak Accounting." This course is designed to help non-accounting managers understand basic accounting principles so they can communicate with corporate accounting staff and manage their own business functions with more fiscal soundness. The target audience for this course is non-accounting managers: engineers, manufacturing, marketing, etc. managers who do not have an accounting background yet have (new) fiscal responsibilities that include making decisions that affect or that are affected by accounting systems. Sometimes, a new manager who does not have a financial background may tend to make business decisions for their unit or group without taking into account various accounting factors that could help them understand the flow of wealth within their company. A core assumption (and assertion) of the course is that understanding these factors can help managers make better business decisions.

A New Approach to Teaching Accounting

This course presents the concepts of accounting in a new way. Instead of beginning the study of accounting from the bottom up, by discussing debits, credits, and accounts, this course takes a "top down" approach, beginning with the grand issues of accounting, such as how to read annual reports. Specifically, the course begins by showing how accounting tracks the resources, obligations, and wealth of a company. These are presented in the company's annual report, an important document for business professionals. As the student examines the different parts of the annual report, the key concepts of accounting, such as different accounts and how transactions affect those accounts, are revealed. This top down approach is effective as it gets the student involved in a (more) familiar practice such as reading annual reports and then presents the more specific (and unfamiliar) concepts of accounting that relate to the report.

Key Course Features

Throughout the suite of LTSA courses, there are many opportunities for the student to practice applying the information and concepts introduced in the course. Many of these practice opportunities take the form of interactive

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(Flash) animations or visiting live websites and analyzing real accounting information from existing companies. Additionally, each How It's Done section in this suite utilizes an interactive (Flash) animation that requires the student to apply the course concepts in a realistic business situation. See figure 2. for an example of one of these interactive tools. This practice is focused on developing basic skills and understanding of the concepts just presented. Finally, in each You Do It section in this suite we challenge the student by asking him or her to apply the new information he or she has just read and explored through a visit to a real company's website. A sample of the tasks he or she may be asked to complete includes looking for general corporate financial performance in a company's annual report, exploring the detailed financial statements found in real annual reports, and comparing methods of accounting as evidenced in a company's annual report with common or accepted methods discussed in the course.

Problem Centered Learning

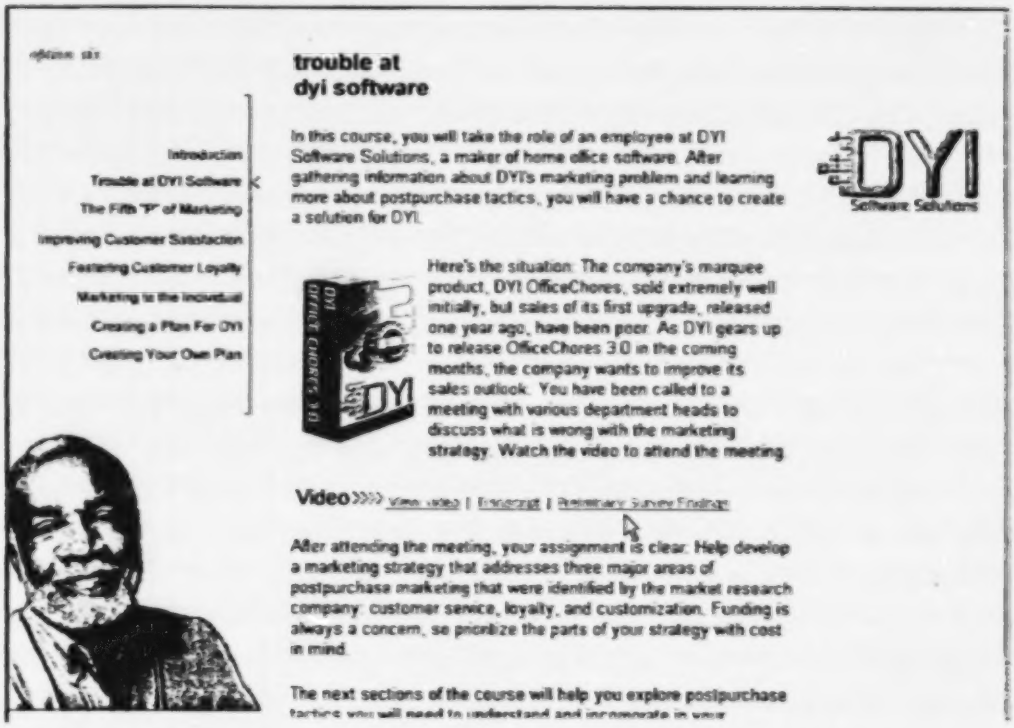
A second course model we have used uses a problem centered approach to design and instruction. Starting off by considering the problem the student is facing, or in some instances the "guiding question" the student is trying to answer, is helpful both for the student as they enter the course, but also for the design team as they create the instruction. Since most learning takes place as the result of a gap between what a learner knows and what a learner wants to know, starting with what exactly the learner wants to know (problem to be solved, major question to be answered) makes sense (Savery & Duffy, 1996; Merrill, 2000). After starting with the problem, the instruction must present the student with the resources and guidance needed to solve the problem or answer the guiding question. Providing multiple opportunities for practice and supporting the student as they leave the course and apply their new knowledge in their normal jobs is the final phase of this instruction. In essence, this course design includes four phases; problem (Why? What context?), information (What? How?), practice (I try with you), and transfer (I go it alone). This overall approach to instruction includes some elements of cognitive apprenticeship as well, since the student receives fading support or scaffolding as they progress through the course.

Sample Course: Post-purchase Marketing

This one to two hour course was designed to teach the concept of marketing after the sale – post-purchase marketing, to various levels of employees in a business. Everyone who comes into contact with customers, or whose work directly impacts a customer's experience after they have purchased a product (or service) from the company, should understand these concepts. On a large scale, this course is designed to help an entire organization understand the importance of after the sale marketing efforts. See figure 3 for the problem-setting page of the course.

The course sections are accessed using the navigation panel on the left. In this course, there is an Introduction section, a problem setting section, four sections devoted to new content information, a problem solution (practice) section, and a final section devoted to supporting the student's transfer of their new knowledge from their course experience to their own workplace.

Figure 3. Problem-centered Learning Course: Post-purchase Marketing


trouble at
dyi software
Introduction
Trouble at DYI Software
The Fifth "P" of Marketing
Improving Customer Satisfaction
Fostering Customer Loyalty
Marketing to the Individual
Creating a Plan For DYI
Creating Your Own Plan
In this course, you will take the role of an employee at DYI Software Solutions, a maker of home office software. After gathering information about DYI's marketing problem and learning more about postpurchase tactics, you will have a chance to create a solution for DYI.
DYI
Software Solutions
Here's the situation: The company's marquee product, DYI OfficeChores, sold extremely well initially, but sales of its first upgrade, released one year ago, have been poor. As DYI gears up to release OfficeChores 3.0 in the coming months, the company wants to improve its sales outlook. You have been called to a meeting with various department heads to discuss what is wrong with the marketing strategy. Watch the video to attend the meeting.
Video
After attending the meeting, your assignment is clear. Help develop a marketing strategy that addresses three major areas of postpurchase marketing that were identified by the market research company: customer service, loyalty, and customization. Funding is always a concern, so prioritize the parts of your strategy with cost in mind.
The next sections of the course will help you explore postpurchase

A New Approach to Teaching Marketing

The Post-purchase Marketing course takes a different approach to teaching marketing. Instead of starting the course with the concepts of post-purchase marketing, the student is presented with a business problem that needs resolution. A fictional company, DYI Software, is experiencing reduced sales and low customer satisfaction. The problem appears to be a failure in post-purchase marketing efforts. The student is given the task of learning about post-purchase marketing and then coming up with a new marketing strategy for the company. As the student moves through the rest of the course, they are presented with the key concepts of post-purchase marketing to help them in formulating their own strategy. Examples and interactive practice elements give the student the opportunity to apply principles learned before embarking on the strategy project for DYI. Throughout the course, the student has the opportunity to interact with other students, posting questions and ideas in the course discussion forum.

Key Course Features

This course uses many of the same instructional methods, tools, and techniques as the cognitive apprenticeship courses do. One additional feature we added to this course we call "embedded self assessments" (Beatty, Branon, & Wilson 2001). This feature was added to assist the student's self-regulatory behavior (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998) during their learning experience (see figure 4). Embedded self-assessments (ESA) are short opportunities for students to assess their understanding while they are learning new course content. They are "embedded" in that they are included within blocks of content, not grouped at the end of a content section as is traditionally done in instructional texts. We believe that ESAs help students understand whether they are truly learning the course material *before* they get to the comprehensive assessment at the end of the course, *before* they attempt to apply course content in a practice situation. Additionally, students have reported that ESAs help them stay focused on the learning task at hand.

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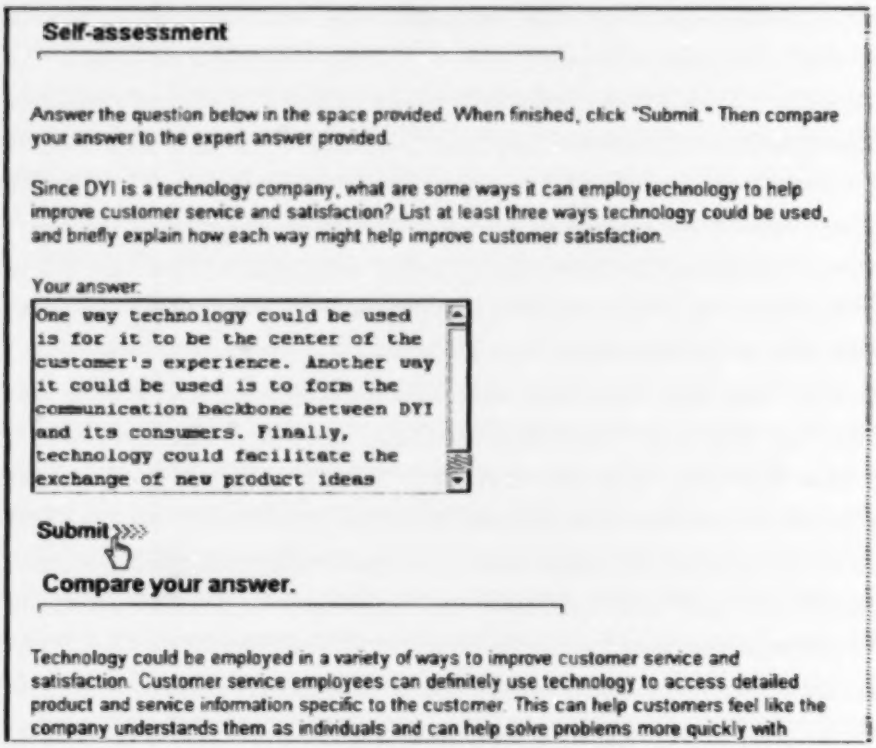
Figure 4 shows an exa mple of the type of ESA used in the post-purchase marketing course. In general, we ask the student to answer a free-response question, and then provide an opportunity for them to check their answer with an "expert" response. Another type of ESA we have used is multiple choice with immediate feedback. We have found that different students have different ESA style preferences (Beatty et al., 2001), and different course content fits different ESA styles as well.

Figure 4. Embedded Self-assessment


Self-assessment
Answer the question below in the space provided. When finished, click "Submit." Then compare your answer to the expert answer provided.
Since DYI is a technology company, what are some ways it can employ technology to help improve customer service and satisfaction? List at least three ways technology could be used, and briefly explain how each way might help improve customer satisfaction.
Your answer:
One way technology could be used is for it to be the center of the customer's experience. Another way it could be used is to form the communication backbone between DYI and its consumers. Finally, technology could facilitate the exchange of new product ideas
Submit
Compare your answer.
Technology could be employed in a variety of ways to improve customer service and satisfaction. Customer service employees can definitely use technology to access detailed product and service information specific to the customer. This can help customers feel like the company understands them as individuals and can help solve problems more quickly with

ID Challenges

One course model fits all ...

One of the challenges to building executive education is that training departments often want a "on-size-fits-all" approach to courses. Having a single course model is easier to manage and track but the reduction in flexibility can detract from learning and motivation. For instructional designers, this can mean having to work with a less than ideal pedagogical structure for some topic areas. In the future, Learner Management Systems (LMSs) should become more complex in how they track learners, thus making it possible that this problem can be reduced.

Working with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

Finding SMEs can be a major hurdle for high-level online executive education. Ideally, a SME should be someone who is an exe cutive and has experience in the narrow topic being covered. The obvious issue is that people with such credentials are extremely busy running companies or consulting and the incentive to have them develop an online course has to be high. Even when a person has been located with the correct skills and knowledge, they probably do not understand the instructional design process.

Working with SMEs has always been a challenge for instructional designers. When developing short, specialized e-learning, however, the difficulty can become acute. Because SMEs are experts, it is often difficult for

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them to write high-level pieces that need to be delivered in a short period of time. Additionally, the expert status of a SME means that they are not used to working in a team-based development environment. The process of negotiating can require astute political skills on the part of the instructional designer, especially when determining what content is 'critical' for an executive level course.

Can accounting really be made motivating?

Unless a person works as an accountant, a course in accounting is probably not one that would be taken by choice. Accounting skills, however, are important for managers at nearly every level. They might not need to be able to handle accounting functions directly, but having a working knowledge of accounting fundamentals can improve their ability to run their department. By understanding this perspective, an instructional designer can build a course that is interesting and motivational for a variety of executive learners.

Learner persistence

Even if a course is short and filled with motivating animations, videos, and content, business managers are always very busy. The temptation can be to move through the training module as quickly as possible. Simply paging through screens does not mean that learning will occur yet, emphasizing this to someone with limited time can be difficult in an online environment. Keeping people on task and focused will in an online environment will likely continue to be a vexing problem for designers.

Ongoing Research

We are engaging in ongoing research projects at Option Six to help us understand online learning better and focus on creating more effective learning environments for each of the instructional situations that we encounter. The corporate environment we find ourselves in is very supportive of focused research that contributes to more effective learning, better overall training solutions, and ultimately more satisfied customers. The projects we are currently pursuing include:

The use of self-assessments in Executive education courses – looking at student perceptions of learning, and actual conceptual learning in courses that use embedded self-assessments.

Self-regulation in self-paced e-learning – how can we better support learners through the instructional design and technical features of an online course?

The use of blended learning solutions – when should students interact asynchronously? When should the course include synchronous meetings? Should part of the training be implemented face-to-face?

Social interaction in online learning – when should social interaction be used in an online course? What conditions should be considered when choosing specific instructional methods?

Conclusion

In closing, we have found that several course instructional models have been effective in creating Executive Education courses that are based on solid instructional theory, that students like, and that actually teach students the course content. Creating effective, engaging courses is challenging and difficult. Following solid instructional design blueprints while still allowing for appropriate divergence and variability based on content, student, and client needs has been a successful strategy for us. We are continuing to study the course models and essential course features we have created and used in our attempts to understand and implement the most effective instructional approaches for business audiences. Expanding our instructional design research to include the emerging issues and concerns of business-focused e-learning promises to be an enjoyable and rewarding venture, in both a theoretical and practical sense. The opportunities are endless.

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